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ABSTRACT

This guide is intended to provide an overview of advocacy issues relating to slow learners in Texas schools. A summary of the research on characteristics of slower learners and successful instructional strategies for these children are also included. The overview addresses slow learners' lack of eligibility for special education, identification of slow learners, and numbers of slow learners. The next section discusses characteristics of these children including lower learning potential, immaturity, a lack of social skills, concrete thinking style, inability to learn incidentally, trouble in generalizing learning, and difficulty in following directions. Suggestions for working with parents are then offered. The following section presents suggested teaching strategies including utilizing the mixed ability classroom; modifying curriculum, pacing and presentation; considering learning styles; supplementing the textbook; lowering reading levels; highlighting; use of study guides; peer tutoring; learning in cooperative groups; developing study skills; homework; modifying tests; and modifying grading. The concluding section considers effects of educational reform, state requirements for identifying students at risk, and slower learners as students at risk. A compliance statement with the 1964 Civil Rights Act completes the document. (Approximately 100 references) (DB)

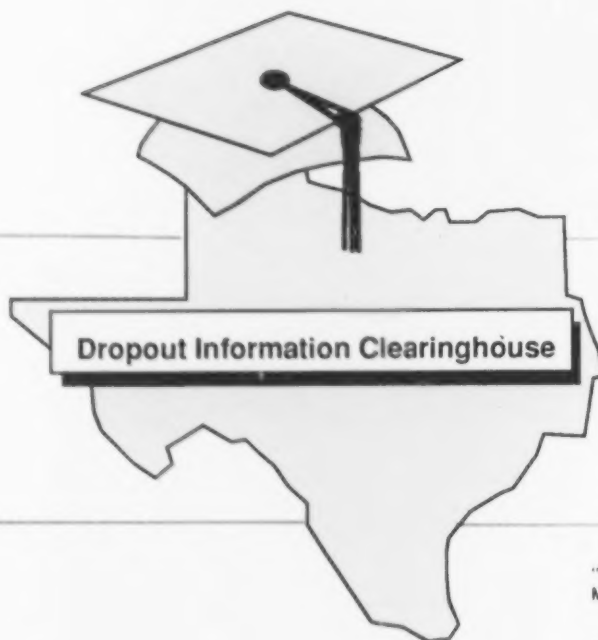
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The Slower Learner: An Advocate's View

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PREFACE

This document is the second in a series of **Practitioners' Guides to Dropout Prevention**, developed by private consultants under contract with the Texas Dropout Information Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse, which is part of the Texas Education Agency Division of Program Planning, was established by House Bill 1010 to create an information forum for service providers who are working together in the area of dropout prevention and recovery.

The purpose of this guide, **The Slower Learner: An Advocate's View**, is to provide an overview of advocacy issues relating to slower learners as identified by local practitioners. A summary of the research on characteristics of slower learners and successful instructional strategies for these individuals are also included.

State law and State Board of Education (SBOE) rule do not currently contain formal guidelines for the identification of slower learners as discussed in this document. The issue of meeting the academic needs of slower learners is instead addressed through requirements relating to Alternatives to Social Promotion, TEC 11.205 and 19 TAC 75.195. These regulations include the category of slower learner as an optional criteria for local school districts to utilize in the identification of at-risk students. As with the identification of students for any special program or services, it is suggested that local practitioners examine several measures of intelligence and functioning before determining that a child is in fact a slower learner.

Information on effective practices and programs for slower learning students is collected and disseminated by several divisions at the Texas Education Agency, including the Division of Program Planning and its Dropout Information Clearinghouse, the Division of Exemplary Programs and its Clearinghouse on Promising Educational Programs, the Division of Special Programs, the Division of Vocational Education Programs, and the Division of Special Education Programs.

For further information or assistance, please contact the Texas Education Agency Dropout Information Clearinghouse, NHP Building, 1609 Shoal Creek Boulevard, Suite 200, Austin, Texas, 78701, (512) 463-9633; or the Texas Education Agency Division of Program Planning, 1701 North Congress Avenue, Austin, TX, 78701, (512) 463-9512.

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INTRODUCTION

In Texas, education is in a state of change. Since the introduction of House Bill 72, there have been a number of activities at the state, district and campus level. School districts are adopting campus improvement goals patterned on effective schools research as part of these reforms. However, there are still issues to explore. In the quest for excellence, academic standards have been raised. Now, for the first time the numbers and kinds of students who are not successful by these standards are coming into sharp focus. House Bill 72 and House Bill 1010 have addressed the needs of these students through "Alternatives to Social Promotion." As of fall 1988, school districts have named an at-risk coordinator and have developed plans for those who are at risk of dropping out before high school graduation.

Among those identified as being at-risk are students who have traditionally met with failure in the schools, those whose intellectual functioning level, IQ 70-89, has affected their ability to keep up with the pace. These are pupils who have trouble jumping the hurdle at four feet -- now it is at six. It is time to focus attention on these students, to look for ways to preserve their self-esteem, and to secure success in learning for this 20-23 per cent of the population who cannot compete, the slower learners.

This guide is designed to help local service providers understand slower learners as well as to plan effective instruction so that these students will experience some measure of academic success.

SLOWER LEARNERS: AN OVERVIEW

Slower learning children have been described in the literature as borderline, dull, dull-normal, dull-average, low achievers, mildly mentally handicapped, or intellectually backwards. With IQ's of 70-89, they have a level of cognitive ability between that of mentally retarded and average ability children (Kirk, Kleibhan, and Lerner, 1978).

These are students with varying degrees of disability who share one common trait: they all have trouble learning and keeping up in school. However, aside from a slower rate of learning, no single trait is unique to slower learners (Featherstone, 1951). In fact, they show the same variations in physical appearance as the general population (Featherstone, 1951; Johnson, 1963; Abraham, 1964).

There is evidence, however, that slower learners may be delayed in the development of oral language skills as well as in all areas of motor coordination (Abraham, 1964). Parents of slower learners may recognize that their child took a little longer to walk or to talk. Many parents will hold their child back in school for a year, instinctively recognizing a lack of both maturity and readiness for success in a classroom setting.

When slower learners enter school, they often have trouble keeping up with their chronological peers. A typical pattern for these individuals is achievement that reflects below-level scores yet shows steady progress. This progress, however, is at such a slow rate that slower learners fall further behind every school year (Johnson, 1963).

Youngie (1974, p. 17) states that "the level of observed and tested achievement in the slower learner will be approximately one and a half to two years behind the academic achievement level expected of children of the same chronological age." By the third grade, slower learners may show achievement scores normally observed at the first grade level. By the sixth grade, they may be achieving on a fourth grade level. By high school, such students may be three to five years behind in basic academic skills -- still making progress, but not enough progress to catch up or keep up with their classmates.

Research data does not support assigning a specific set of emotional and behavioral characteristics to slower learners (Johnson, 1963). Perceiving themselves as continuously under pressure to keep up with classmates, these individuals often drop out prior to high school graduation. Slower learners may thus join the ranks of poorly achieving students who are now considered to be "at-risk."

Referred -- But Not Qualified -- For Special Education

Because of their low level of academic achievement, many slower learners will eventually be referred to Special Education departments for testing. However, most of them are not eligible for these services. Those who are eligible qualify only because they have an additional handicapping condition which meets Special Education guidelines -- for example, a physical, emotional, visual or hearing impairment, such as being emotionally disturbed, autistic or learning disabled. However, many slower learners have no physiological basis for being slow, so they do not meet Special Education guidelines for placement.

Why Are Slower Learners Not "Learning Disabled?"

Slower learners may have recognizable disabilities in learning, but they do not currently qualify for Special Education services under the category of "learning disabled." For example, in order to qualify as learning disabled, a student must fail to achieve, commensurate with age and ability levels in the area(s) of oral language, written language and/or mathematics. Texas Education Agency guidelines (1980, p. 26) state: "When a student's educational performance is below the mean of the district but consistent with the student's assessed intellectual functioning, the student is not eligible to be classified as learning disabled."

Nonetheless, the academic situation of the slower learner is often problematic for the following reasons. The slower learning child does not fall two standard deviations below the mean (or average score) with respect to intellectual functioning as measured by IQ tests and therefore cannot be classified as "mentally retarded." Furthermore, this child may not always exhibit a discrepancy between achievement and ability and therefore cannot be considered learning disabled. All of these factors disqualify the slower learner for Special Education services as required by federal law P. L. 94-142. Thus the responsibility for educating these students lies with regular education programs under the standard expectations for mastery. However, with the raised academic standards of educational reform, many slower learners are increasingly at risk of failing in school.

Do Slower Learners Belong In Special Education?

Research suggests that slower learners do not belong in Special Education programs that would remove them from the educational mainstream. Studies also indicate that slower learners will benefit from placement in regular, mixed-ability classroom settings where average and above-average students may serve as role models. Carefully planned instruction can maximize the slower learner's individual learning strengths (Dunn, 1986).

Why Are Slower Learners Slow?

The causes of slow learning are varied and affect students from all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The most common origin of slow learning is often termed "constitutional slowness": A child is born with mental capacities that place him or her on the intellectual continuum between normal intelligence and mild mental retardation. Likewise, a child born with normal or superior intelligence may become a slower learner due to malnutrition, illness, or parental neglect (Youngie, 1974).

When Can A Child Be Reasonably Identified As A Slower Learner?

While IQ tests may be given to a preschool child, experts indicate that these scores cannot be accurately interpreted until a student is eight or nine years old. Until then, IQ scores can be misleading for many reasons. It is difficult to be certain why IQ test scores of very young children are low. But these scores, for many reasons, often predict later trouble in learning.

Some slower learners may be developmentally or language-delayed. Others may come from economically disadvantaged families. Slower learners could have been ill, abused or ignored as children. They might be dyslexic or could have any one of a number of diagnosable learning disabilities such as problems with auditory discrimination or visual perception.

By the third or fourth grade, when school structure and curriculum begin to intensify, the slower learner's constant struggle to keep up and to achieve mastery of classroom objectives will be clearly visible.

How Many Slower Learners Are There?

The percentage of slower learners in the general population is much greater than is generally recognized: approximately one in five or 20-23 per cent of the population are reported to exhibit IQ's in the range of 70-89 (see Table One below). This percentage is often surprising. Most people understand that the average IQ is 100, but may fail to consider that the word "average" by definition means there will be as many people below this mark as above it (Dunlap, 1979).

The bell-shaped curve typically used to depict IQ scores demonstrates that half of the general population is of average intelligence, ranging from IQ 90-109. As shown in Table One, about 25 per cent of the population will therefore be above average and 25 per cent will be below average in intelligence.

TABLE ONE
WISC-R MANUAL
WECHSLER
INTELLIGENCE CLASSIFICATIONS

<u>IQ</u>	<u>CLASSIFICATION</u>	PERCENT INCLUDED THEORETICAL NORMAL CURVE	ACTUAL SAMPLE
130 and ABOVE	VERY SUPERIOR	2.2	2.3
120-129	SUPERIOR	6.7	7.4
110-119	HIGH AVERAGE	16.1	16.5
90-109	AVERAGE	50.0	49.4
80-89	DULL (SLOWER LEARNER)	16.1	16.2
70-79	BORDERLINE (SLOWER LEARNER)	6.7	6.0
69 and BELOW	MENTALLY DEFICIENT	2.2	2.2

CHARACTERISTICS OF SLOWER LEARNING CHILDREN

Slower Learners Have A Lower Learning Potential

Educators may incorrectly believe that if slower learners are just given longer periods of time, they can learn as well as students of average ability. In fact, the projected achievement level for slower learners is more accurately depicted as follows (Dunlap, 1979):

TABLE TWO
PROJECTED ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL FOR SLOWER LEARNERS

	<u>AGE 14, (GRADE 9)</u>	<u>AGE 17, (GRADE 12)</u>
IQ 75	5th grade, 5 months	7th grade, 7 months
IQ 80	6th grade, 2 months	8th grade, 6 months
IQ 85	6th grade, 9 months	9th grade, 5 months

Slower learners usually peak academically somewhere between the seventh and the ninth grades. However, progress will vary in individual cases. Some slower learners may accomplish more, others less. Many slower learners are energetic and highly motivated, and may eventually succeed in school with substantial support. Others may experience personal and social problems which impede academic progress. Discouraged by scholastic competition, many slower learners who possess little motivation or persistence may eventually drop out of school.

Since most slower learners cannot master a twelfth grade education in twelve years, they are likely to fail repeatedly. This lack of academic success is not due to an absence of motivation, but of ability (Johnson, 1963). Nonetheless, educators often expect students with less than average intellectual ability to meet the same standards that average and above average students meet. The resulting frustration for the slower learner may lead to difficulties not only in school, but also in social and emotional adjustment (Johnson, 1963). By developing realistic expectations of slower learners as well as providing encouragement, educators can begin to see positive results in terms of alleviating these difficulties.

Many Slower Learners Are Immature, Naive, Gullible And Lack Common Sense

From a very young age, slower learners are often described as being particularly immature, naive and gullible (Abraham, 1964). These are traits that often follow them into adulthood.

Most slower learners can make good choices when all available options are presented to them, but they often have trouble seeing what these options are. They are less likely to initiate activities and to find, correct or understand their mistakes when compared with

same-age peers (Johnson, 1963). Many slower learners have trouble understanding cause-and-effect relationships as well as other abstract reasoning tasks (Abraham, 1964).

Slower Learners May Lack Social Skills

Not all slower learners have inadequate social skills, but those who are lacking in this area may experience significant interpersonal problems. Since successful social interactions require the ability to read and judge situational factors before choosing an action, slower learners often appear to act without thought.

The development of social skills occurs at a young age for most children. Slower learners often embarrass others because they appear to say and do inappropriate things. They may act immaturely, not recognizing whether they are welcome in social settings, failing to follow along in conversations, or missing the punch line of a joke.

These social problems often begin early. In elementary school, slower learning children are frequently the objects of jokes and in junior high they may continue to be teased. However, by high school many slower learners are simply ignored by classmates. Slower learners often feel this isolation and their self-esteem may be damaged by this experience.

If slower learners do not learn to make and keep friends at an early age, a negative, self-perpetuating cycle of social failure can develop. As adults they may lack the social skills necessary for keeping a job, such as getting along with other employees, being able to take criticism, or following directions.

Part of the problem is that slower learners often lack the ability to read the subtleties of body language. They may not understand behavioral norms, or they may not foresee the consequences of their actions. They could be overly sensitive to criticism or lack self-control. Additionally, they may not always ask questions to clarify what they do not understand. Slower learners often have poor communication skills or have trouble initiating conversations.

It is important to note that not all slower learners lack the ability to develop adequate social skills. However, to enhance their self-esteem or hide their learning problems, many of these students may use their social skills in negative and compensating ways, becoming class clowns or troublemakers, and in the process choosing the label "bad" rather than "dumb."

The development of adequate social skills is an obstacle for many slower learners. As one teacher described it: "Slower learners have no filters. Most of us have a mind, a mouth -- and, hopefully, a filter in between." She gave an example. "One of my slower learning students was trying to be complimentary one day. Someone pulled up in front of the school in a bright red convertible with the top down. This student came up to her and said, 'If you would only dye your hair blonde, get contact lenses and lose 50 pounds, you would look terrific in that car!'"

THINKING SKILLS

Slower Learners Are Concrete, Not Abstract Thinkers

When compared to more able students, slower learners often comprehend very literally, seeing only one dimension of a concept. They often have lower levels of reasoning and cognitive abilities (Johnson, 1963). This cognitive deficit may lead to deficiencies with respect to thinking skills such as defining, distinguishing, and analyzing (Karnes, 1970). Teaching a slower learner can be accomplished by providing direct, systematic steps for him or her to follow.

Slower learners do not learn by simply listening and looking (Dunn, 1986; Dunn and Griggs, 1988). However, many have well-developed tactile and kinesthetic abilities. In order to comprehend a concept they often need hands-on, concrete learning experiences. The utilization of multisensory teaching techniques is thus critical to the academic success of the slower learner.

Elementary teachers are often prepared to present information through multisensory instructional approaches. But few secondary teachers have had any formal training on classroom instruction as it relates to learning styles.

Teachers Should Teach And Reteach In A Variety Of Ways

Because slower learners may not learn a new concept the first time it is introduced, classroom teachers should plan to reteach or reinforce it through various learning modalities including auditory, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic.

Research on the learning styles of these individuals indicates that few slower learners are auditory learners and thus need hands-on involvement in order to learn successfully. In addition, Sinatra and Venezia (1986) report a study in which slower learners improved their reading comprehension when teachers provided a "visual literacy" approach to English Language Arts instruction. But reteaching need not translate to repetitious drill and practice. Drills with "more of the same" are ineffective for changing student mastery patterns (Dunn and Griggs, 1988).

Slower Learners Lack The Ability To Learn Incidentally

In order for a slower learner to be academically successful, information should be carefully targeted and presented (Karnes, 1970). Slower learners often do not learn material incidentally as students of average ability do. Slower learners should also be taught behaviors needed for academic success such as grooming, hygiene and classroom safety. Additionally, teachers should teach study and thinking skills to slower learners concurrently with subject matter content.

Slower Learners Have Trouble Transferring Information

Slower learners often have trouble applying what they have learned in one context to another. For example, they may not automatically make the connection between a concept taught in English class and its application to a social studies lesson. This relationship should be clearly pointed out by the teacher.

Slower Learners' Mental Gears Shift Slowly

Often, slower learners seem to take time to get mentally warmed up and it is difficult for them to shift gears to change from one lesson to another. They may "awaken" in a classroom to find that the class has gone on without them and are confused when they once again pay attention.

Slower Learners Take Longer For Assignments And Tests

Slower learners often do not complete class assignments, homework, or tests within the time allotted. Their minds do not work quickly enough. They are poor readers and may have trouble organizing their thoughts. An activity that should require ten minutes may take the slower learner half an hour or longer to complete. Slower learners may also perceive daily pressure to keep up with their classmates. When these students are repeatedly unsuccessful, motivation, persistence, responsibility and self-esteem may suffer.

Slower Learners Need Help Following Directions

Slower learners often have difficulty following verbal directions, particularly if there are more than two or three steps to remember (Karnes, 1970). This is a characteristic they do not outgrow. Thus it is important for teachers to activate slower learners' listening skills. For example, the statement "I am going to ask you to do two things," is one way for a teacher to initiate a lesson. It is also a good idea to model desired responses if more than two directions are given at once (Walter, 1987).

WORKING WITH PARENTS

The Admission Review and Dismissal (ARD) committee meeting for admission into Special Education programs can be a difficult experience for parents of slower learners. When shown low IQ scores, they frequently do not hear or understand educators' recommendations. In addition, Kemp (1987) reports that parents who express anxiety to school personnel about their child's academic abilities are sometimes informed that their child will "grow out of it."

Parents are often confused in ARD committee meetings by educational jargon, do not understand the relationship between achievement scores and IQ, or do not comprehend why a child does or does not qualify for Special Education services. They may often feel intimidated in these meetings by a large number of professionals who appear to know what is best for their child.

No parent wants to hear that their child is slow. Having a child who is a slower learner is difficult to accept because it is often easy for parents to engage in denial. If a child is mentally retarded, that reality will be faced long before he or she enters the public school system. For example, parents may have heard the term "learning disabled." They know that there is no shame attached to being "dyslexic." Parents can also take comfort in a learning disabled child's "average" or "above average" measured intelligence. But few parents can really understand or accept the fact that their child is a slower learner.

Several issues can be broached in these parent-school meetings. First, school personnel should inform parents about their child's IQ scores. In order to explain a child's abilities, IQ should be discussed in a positive manner. Educators may stress that IQ scores are not an absolute measure of success in life, but that these measures do predict a child's ability to be academically successful. Low IQ scores usually indicate that the student will struggle to keep up in school.

School personnel can also emphasize that IQ scores do not measure important personality traits like determination, ambition and enthusiasm -- abilities that help all students to achieve their full potential. And like everyone else, slower learners can be either overachievers or underachievers.

It is also important to help parents develop realistic expectations for their slower learning child. However, acceptance that their child is a slower learner often comes very gradually. Parents may go through a very real grief process over the fact that their child is a slower learner. This grief often reappears at various points in the child's development -- stages such as adolescence, graduation from school, and leaving home.

This grief over their child's low level of ability is sometimes directed at educators. The parents' initial reaction to the news that their child is a slower learner may be anger. Because this experience is often very painful, it is easy for parental hostility to be targeted at the teacher, at the school, or at education in general -- for not "fixing" their child's learning problem. Accepting that one's child is a slower learner may take years, or may never come at all.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Mixed-Ability Classrooms

Educators can utilize many teaching strategies to maximize the academic achievement of slower learners. Research indicates that a large classroom setting may create a difficult instructional and discipline management situation for teachers of students of differing ability levels. This setting may also create a competitive atmosphere which is unproductive for slower learners. For example, Raffins (1986) reports that the competitive atmosphere found in some schools is particularly frustrating to below-average students, who in turn are more likely to exhibit decreased efforts and increased apathy. Many schools have experimented with ability grouping or "leveling" as one solution to this issue. This approach provides teachers with increased freedom to modify instruction in terms of curriculum, pacing and presentation, in order to instruct less able learners.

However, ability grouping has not always been the best solution. Ability grouping does not address the slower learner's need for academic role models as provided by average and above-average ability students. Thus it does not prepare the slower learner to make his or her way in the real world where working with people of varying intellectual abilities is necessary. A learning environment in which students are grouped by academic ability may also deny slower learning students the opportunity to develop important social skills through interactions with students of all ability levels.

Many traditional classroom approaches also frequently rely on a lecture/textbook format that does not provide slower learners with the structure they need for academic success. Teachers can make a significant difference in the success rates of slower learners by using instructional techniques designed to meet each student's individual learning requirements (Dunn, 1986; Slavin, 1987). These techniques are discussed as follows.

Modifying Curriculum, Pacing And Presentation

Teachers often request suggestions for techniques which will modify instruction for the slower learner. One of the least effective ways to teach these students is with a textbook/lecture format (Dunn, 1986). Slower learners are typically poor readers and are usually several grade levels behind their peers in academic achievement. In addition, they may be poorly motivated or not sufficiently persistent to perform a given task. Lacking organizational skills, they are not self-structured and they do not work well independently (Karnes, 1970; Dunn and Griggs, 1988).

The "large group" classroom instruction model, based on a mastery standard for students who may in fact vary widely in ability, can present slower learners with significant learning difficulties. Modifying instruction provides the types of learning experiences that these students need to achieve academic success.

"Modifying" in this context refers to changing the presentation of instruction through multisensory techniques. Some teachers may find that the easiest way to accomplish this is to present all basic concepts and essential elements through a wide variety of modalities (Smith, 1985). Most students, including the brightest pupils, will benefit from the variety and built-in reinforcement characterized by a multisensory instructional approach.

Learning Styles

A learning style is defined in this document as the manner in which cognitive, motivational and physiological variables affect a person's ability to perceive, interact with and respond to the environment (Keefe, 1985). These cognitive elements may include perceptual skills such as analytic, spatial, discrimination and information processing abilities. Motivational elements which affect learning include such personality variables as persistence. Physiological elements which influence learning include time, temperature, mobility, auditory intake and design variables (Dunn and Griggs, 1988). Sample (1982) has provided a literature review which discusses the learning style of the slower learner.

Information about an individual's preferred learning style is useful to both the teacher and student. Each student has a characteristic learning style pattern which can be enhanced or hindered by factors in the environment. Of critical importance for marginal and underachieving individuals is the match between instructional delivery and their perceptual strengths. As Dunn (1986) states, "Research suggests that achievement is increased substantially and quickly when students are introduced to new material through their strengths and reinforced through supplementary modalities." Bauer (1987) found that students who were made aware of their own individual learning styles improved in terms of both academic performance and self-esteem.

If a teacher can diagnose each individual student's learning style in order to discover a distinctive pattern of learning strengths, and can target these strengths with multisensory teaching techniques, students will learn faster and retain information longer (Dunn, 1986). Communicating learning style information to students also helps them to appreciate individual differences in learning and to act on the basis of their own learning strengths.

Supplementing The Textbook

The textbook/lecture format of instruction is usually the least suitable method for a slower learner, because these students are below-level readers at best. Moreover, the reading levels of some textbooks may be higher than they were designed to teach. For example, a ninth grade slower student who reads on a fifth grade level could be faced with a textbook written on an eleventh grade reading level. Additionally, slower learners who do have the cognitive ability to read a textbook might in turn experience difficulty determining what to study. All of the words and thoughts on a page frequently seem of equal importance to a slower learner who has trouble discerning and prioritizing information (Featherstone, 1951). Not knowing what to study or skim, a slower learner often wastes valuable time trying to locate specific information. Supplementing textbooks with a variety of techniques can help the slower learner succeed in learning course content.

Several researchers have discussed techniques for modifying instruction for slower learners; e.g., Graham and Stoddard, 1982; Shevell, 1983; Liedtke, 1985; Sinatra and Venezia, 1986; Graham and Cline, 1987; Robinson and Kirby, 1987; and Mathes and Proctor, 1988. Additionally, studies have shown that computer-based instruction can be successfully adapted to the academic requirements of the slower learner (e.g. Clark, 1986; Graham and Stoddard, 1987).

Lowering Reading Levels

Teachers can sometimes determine the level of difficulty in instructional materials by examining their reading level. A number of formulas for estimating reading levels are available, including Flesch, Farr-Jenkins-Patterson, Dale-Chall, Danielson-Bryan, Spache, Frye and Gunning's Fox Index. Of these, the Frye and Fox Index are among the more widely used (Texas Education Agency, 1977).

If reading materials are too difficult for a group of slower learning students, teachers can make modifications in a number of ways. One technique to lower reading level is by rewriting in order to simplify language and reduce sentence length. Chapters can also be tape recorded as a listening aid for slower learners. Other techniques include text summaries, highlighting and teacher-designed study guides.

Highlighting

Highlighting is an effective way to direct student attention to important information. However, giving slower learners highlighters and turning them loose on a textbook will not work. They need to be shown how and what to highlight. Instructions on how to highlight should also be clear enough to be successfully implemented by the slower learner.

Highlighting is often helpful to slower learners. Color coding can also assist slower learners in identifying information as well as distinguishing between vocabulary words and key concepts. Once new vocabulary words have been introduced, slower learning students can be shown how to build a word bank or personal dictionary, listing vocabulary items either alphabetically or by subject. Highlighting will help them decide what to put in their dictionaries, which can then become a resource for future reference and review.

Study Guides

A study guide is a summary of information from the textbook which can be utilized in different ways, limited only by the imagination of the teacher. In its simplest form, the study guide can be used to focus student attention on critical text information. Questions may be typed with spaces provided for the student to answer. Each question should contain clear directions such as "Look on page 102," "Be sure to read the second paragraph as it is the most important point," or "You can skim the information on pages 19-21," (Halliday, 1987). Research by Shivel (1983) also indicates that slower learners often benefit from a categorical presentation of the material to be learned.

Study guides can become a resource for chapter review. Guides which include visual cues can also help students remember information at test time. Study guides thus assist slower learners in many ways. First, they give teachers the opportunity to lower the reading level of the text. Second, they direct students to key information and prioritize what sections should be studied. Third, study guides provide teachers with a tool for classroom management by helping to keep students on task. These guides can be assigned individually, with peer tutors, or in small groups.

Thus in many instances, slower learners may be assisted by teacher-prepared study guides. Teachers often work together to develop these guides, each taking one or more chapters in a given textbook. The resulting guides are relevant as long as the textbook is in use.

Peer Tutoring

Many researchers cite the importance of peer tutoring and note improvement in academic and social development for both tutor and tutee (Wigfield and Asher, 1984). Peer tutoring can be implemented several ways. It can be as formal as training high school students and giving them academic credit to act as tutors, or it can be as informal as having brighter students work with slower individuals within a given classroom. Some researchers caution that tutors should be trained and supervised closely. Studies also suggest that tutors who are assigned on a long term basis should be several years older than their pupils (Wigfield and Asher, 1984, p. 442).

One effective tutoring technique is to allow slower learners the experience of being tutors to children in lower grade levels (Wigfield and Asher, 1984). This can be a confidence booster while simultaneously reinforcing key academic concepts for the tutor, since learning is enhanced when students must explain or teach material (Alternative Strategies, p. 10).

Peer tutoring generally works well with slower learners. They often learn better from peers than they do from adults because peer tutors frequently use language to explain concepts that their classmates more readily understand. Furthermore, students who are tutored by a peer are often more likely to admit that they do not understand a given concept or ask for additional assistance.

Learning In Cooperative Groups

One effective teaching strategy for slower learners is the use of various small group techniques. Four to six students can be organized into mixed-ability groups to learn with and from one another. Teachers may assign such roles within the groups as recorder, reporter, leader, or materials manager. The teacher could then introduce an objective before dividing the class into small groups. Study guides might be prepared for the groups to follow, and students can work together to answer questions. At the close of the study period, the teacher may conduct a large group sharing/reinforcement session, asking reporters from the groups to share answers with the class. The teacher might then guide and direct students to include any information that needs to be added, while summarizing and reinforcing group learning.

Effective group strategies include Team Learning, Circles of Knowledge, Group Analysis, Brainstorming, Case Study and Role Play/Simulations (Dunn and Dunn, 1978). Other cooperative techniques are discussed by Johnson and Johnson (1985) and Slavin (1986).

Research shows that working in cooperative groups enhances academic achievement, self-esteem, attitudes and interpersonal relationships (Johnson and Johnson, 1985). Slower learners often gain confidence in small groups. They might be willing to discuss and share ideas with four or five other students whereas they might not risk failure in a larger group. The more able student often benefits as well, through development of leadership skills, teaching, explaining, learning to listen, and learning to consider other points of view.

It is important for teachers to randomly assign students of varying intellectual abilities to small groups and to change the composition of these groups often. Otherwise students with stronger intellectual abilities may tend to dominate a given group. Group work should also be carefully structured and monitored.

Small cooperative learning groups are a good way to introduce higher level thinking skills to slower learners. Study sheets can provide new information, and any accompanying questions can be designed to cover Bloom's Taxonomy from the fact/knowledge level to higher level thinking skills such as inference, analysis, and evaluation (Marshall, 1988). Slower students may also benefit from seeing how other students think, reason and reach conclusions. Just as important, they can observe that other students often come up with incorrect or inappropriate answers and that these students, too, may be argued with by peers. A final benefit of cooperative learning is an enhanced sense of belonging and of being academically successful.

Study Skills

It is very important to teach slower learners how to study effectively. The same kinds of instruction in study skills that work for other students also apply to slower learners, with this important consideration: slower learners need to be shown how to perform each study skill and how to study in each content area. Teaching slower learning students to study according to individual learning style patterns can also greatly facilitate their academic success.

For example, Mountain View High School in Mesa, Arizona has implemented a program which demonstrates instruction in study skills. Teachers in this program concentrate on instruction pertaining to one study skill each month. Students are shown how to perform each skill and teachers monitor their performance (Smith, 1985).

One important element of the success of the Mesa, Arizona program is follow-up. Teachers check class notes to see if students understand how to use the study techniques, and reward them for correct performance. The reinforcement of a study skill by teachers in all classes serves to demonstrate its universality (Smith, 1985).

Homework

For many slower learners, their parents, and their teachers, homework can be difficult and frustrating. Slower learners are often not ready for the independent practice of homework assignments. Homework is often a source of failure because slower learners can be disorganized. Even when they complete an assignment, they may prepare it improperly or forget to turn it in on time. This is especially troublesome since completing homework assignments can take slower learners two to three times longer than other students.

There are several strategies that a teacher can implement to address this problem. One solution is to simply eliminate the slower learners' homework altogether, by designing special projects to accomplish the same goals for the entire class.

However, homework is a significant component of the teaching cycle. It is intended to provide independent practice in order to facilitate retention. Homework can also foster responsibility for one's own learning. Therefore, homework can be judiciously assigned to slower learners. Shorter assignments may reinforce learning or identify gaps that require

additional instruction. When homework is assigned, it should be immediately checked and given feedback. Otherwise, slower learning students may not see the relevance of homework or not develop a pattern of responsibility for completing it.

Assignments could also be weighted so that homework does not constitute a major portion of the student's total class grade. Students might also be allowed to make up one or two homework papers with extra credit earned in other ways.

Modifying Tests

Many slower learners may experience test-taking anxiety based upon an extensive history of test failure. Often, the very wording of questions or the format of a page confuses these students, so that even if they know the answers, they are unable to communicate them correctly.

Teachers can reduce the potential for slower learners' confusion with the following test preparation techniques (Murphy, 1986):

- type all questions, in as large a type as possible, with lines double-spaced.
- group similar questions together (matching, multiple choice, fill in the blank) and write separate directions for each set.
- use white space generously and use several lines to separate questions from one another.
- type multiple-choice questions with vertical, rather than horizontal, choices.
- keep multiple choice and matching answers as short as possible, so that poor readers need not get frustrated, give up and begin guessing, or simply quit.

Other pointers for test modification are:

- begin the test with easy questions in order to encourage students.
- monitor the reading level in all questions. Be sure all questions are clear and direct.
- avoid true/false questions and questions which have negative answers (for example, "Which of the following is not true?").
- tape record questions for students with poor reading skills, or give the test orally.
- allow slower learning students with poor handwriting skills to take the test orally or to type answers.
- remember that the goal of assessment is to discover if a student knows the information, not whether he or she can give the information to the teacher in a certain format.

Modified Grading

Grading might also be modified in order to improve academic success rates for slower learners. Tests could be graded on the basis of the number of questions correctly answered, rather than the total number of questions. Some questions might be weighted with more points if they give a clear indication of mastery of an essential element or objective.

Some schools are experimenting with giving "T's" for "incomplete" on tests rather than assigning failing grades. A student is then rescheduled to take the test. Other schools may limit the number of failed tests that can be retaken, or record the grade as "70" when a test is retaken.

Schools might also use differential weighting for grades on report cards: for example, honors class "A's" could carry more points than regular class "A's" and "A's" for modified curriculum might carry still fewer points.

CONCLUSION

Effects of Educational Reform

If a slower learning student can be formally identified by a school district as at risk under guidelines contained in state law and State Board of Education (SBOE) rule, local service providers can then make modifications in curriculum, pacing, presentation and grading.

Educational reform has had a dramatic impact on the lives of many slower learners who were frequently "socially promoted" in the past. Social promotion was positive for these students in some respects, because it prevented them from feeling like constant failures and protected their self-esteem. Social promotion also prevented retention of these students and thus kept them with same-age classmates. This is important because being overage for grade is a frequent predictor of dropping out, for slower learners as well as other students.

However, social promotion is not the best option for slower learners. A better answer is to help them to succeed in school. The requirements of recent educational reforms in Texas forbid social promotion, and make allowances for students who have been formally identified as at risk. Such students may have their academic needs addressed under 19 Texas Administrative Code (TAC) 75.195, relating to Alternatives to Social Promotion.

How Are Students Identified As At Risk?

State law and State Board of Education (SBOE) rule require each school district in Texas to have a plan in place for the identification of at-risk students. The four mandatory criteria for this identification of at-risk students in Grades 7-12 include:

- 1) has not been promoted one or more times in grades 1-6 and continues to be unable to master the essential elements in the 7th or higher grade level;
- 2) is two or more years below grade level in reading or mathematics;
- 3) has failed at least two courses in one or more semesters and is not expected to graduate within four years of the time they entered the ninth grade; or
- 4) has failed one or more of the reading, writing or mathematics sections of the most recent TEAMS test beginning with the seventh grade (19 TAC 75.195).

This does not imply that only students who have been retained or designated as academically at risk under the four criteria outlined above may receive assistance. There is a fifth category of criteria, in 19 TAC 75.195 for identifying students as at risk. This category derives from the following statement: "In addition to criteria outlined in this subsection [above], the district may consider the environmental, familial, economic, social, developmental or other psycho-social factors where such factor contributes to the student's inability to progress academically" (19 TAC 75.195)(c)(5).

Why Is It Important To Identify Slower Learners As At-Risk Students?

Identifying slower learners as at-risk students can open the door to programs and services provided under "Alternatives to Social Promotion." For instance, a first grader who cannot be promoted to the second grade and who does not qualify for Special Education services can be identified as at risk under the "contributing factor" criteria in 19 TAC 75.195(c)(5). If IQ tests indicate that he or she is a slower learner, that score could be utilized as a contributing factor. An important consideration is that a student must be formally identified by his or her school district as at risk according to the procedures set up by local policy in order to qualify for services and programs under 19 TAC 75.195.

Once identified as at risk, a student can also be "placed" in the next grade. However, this placement differs significantly from social promotion. Once a student is identified as at risk and is formally placed in the next grade, teachers may then modify curriculum, pacing, and instruction to meet that student's needs. Formal placement in the next grade also allows the local school district to serve the student through instructional resources and strategies such as computers, learning centers, or tutorial programs.

Slower Learners Are Students At Risk

Today the national dropout rate is reported at 25 percent. It is also predicted to rise to 40 percent by the year 2000. It is currently estimated that dropouts cost the United States \$75 billion annually in terms of lost tax revenues, increased welfare costs and costs due to increased incarceration. The price of dropping out to private industry in terms of reduction of a quality workforce is another \$25 billion per year (figures from the National Dropout Prevention Foundation). Hodgkinson (1986) asserts, "It has been estimated that as many as one-third of all students attending school today will drop out before graduation. Of these, more than one-half could be described as slow learners." Thus slower learners represent a significant proportion of the dropout and at-risk student population.

Educators can begin to address the individual differences in all students' potential to learn and succeed in school by providing for the unique needs of the slower learner. In so doing, they will help students who are slower learners achieve in school, graduate, and go on to become contributing members of society. The academic failure of slower learners often leads to dependence on public welfare -- or worse. For example, IQ tests were administered to inmates of the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC) in December, 1985. At that time, 53 percent of those tested scored between a 70 and 89. (Source: O. L. McCotter, Executive Director, TDC). Thus it appears that approximately one-half of Texas' prison population may in fact be slower learners.

Slower learners often do not provoke our sympathy, since they may require more time, energy, and creativity in order to address their unique academic and social needs. Their success is often slow in coming and it is seldom spectacular. Fagon (1987) emphasizes the importance of caring teachers to academic success for all students. Caring, creative teachers as well as other service providers can adopt strategies and programs to meet each slower learner's needs and thus help these individuals achieve academic success.

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COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

TITLE VI, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; THE MODIFIED COURT ORDER, CIVIL ACTION 5281, FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT, EASTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS, TYLER DIVISION

Reviews of local education agencies pertaining to compliance with Title VI Civil Rights Act of 1964 and with specific requirements of the Modified Court Order, Civil Action No. 5281, Federal District Court, Eastern District of Texas, Tyler Division are conducted periodically by staff representatives of the Texas Education Agency. These reviews cover at least the following policies and practices:

- (1) acceptance policies on student transfers from other school districts;
- (2) operation of school bus routes or runs on a non-segregated basis;
- (3) nondiscrimination in extracurricular activities and the use of school facilities;
- (4) nondiscriminatory practices in the hiring, assigning, promoting, paying, demoting, reassigning, or dismissing of faculty and staff members who work with children;
- (5) enrollment and assignment of students without discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin;
- (6) nondiscriminatory practices relating to the use of a student's first language; and
- (7) evidence of published procedures for hearing complaints and grievances.

In addition to conducting reviews, the Texas Education Agency staff representatives check complaints of discrimination made by a citizen or citizens residing in a school district where it is alleged discriminatory practices have occurred or are occurring.

Where a violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act is found, the findings are reported to the Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education.

If there is a direct violation of the Court Order in Civil Action No. 5281 that cannot be cleared through negotiation, the sanctions required by the Court Order are applied.

TITLE VII, CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964; EXECUTIVE ORDERS 11246 AND 11375; TITLE IX, 1973 EDUCATION AMENDMENTS; REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973 AS AMENDED; 1974 AMENDMENTS TO THE WAGE-HOUR LAW EXPANDING THE AGE DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT ACT OF 1967; AND VIETNAM ERA VETERANS READJUSTMENT ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1972 AS AMENDED IN 1974.

It is the policy of the Texas Education Agency to comply fully with the nondiscrimination provisions of all federal and state laws and regulations by assuring that no person shall be excluded from consideration for recruitment, selection, appointment, training, promotion, retention, or any other personnel action, or be denied any benefits or participation in any programs or activities which it operates on the grounds of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, handicap, age, or veteran status (except where age, sex, or handicap constitute a bona fide occupational qualification necessary to proper and efficient administration). The Texas Education Agency makes positive efforts to employ and advance in employment all protected groups.



Texas Education Agency
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